Free Persons of Color in Charleston, S.C. Before the Civil War

Chicora Foundation, Inc.
1997

Chicora Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 8664 ▪ 861 Arbutus Drive
Columbia, South Carolina 29202-8664
803/787-6910
Email: chicora1@aol.com

Although Charleston before 1864 is sometimes characterized by the dichotomy between black and white — free and slave — there were from very early times "free persons of color" or free blacks. The first census, in 1790, found 8,089 white persons, 7,684 slaves, and 586 free blacks in Charleston. This tells us that very early in Charleston's history free blacks constituted nearly 3.6% of the city's population. By 1861 free blacks comprised 7.8% of Charleston's population. Although these 3,441 persons formed a small community by Northern standards, of the ten largest Southern cities, only Baltimore, New Orleans, and Washington contained larger free black communities prior to the Civil War.

Although there were free blacks in the countryside, the economic and social opportunities were slim in comparison to those presented by the cities. That's why in 1850, about 40% of all free persons of color in South Carolina lived in Charleston and 89% of all free blacks in Charleston County lived in the city!

Where Did Free Blacks Come From and How Did They Obtain Their Freedom?

Since many urban slaves were allowed to hire their time out, some saved sufficient sums to purchase their own freedom. Charleston, as one of the busiest seaports in the region, was a focal point for blacks immigrating to the region. A few were even granted their freedom for service to the state or their local community. For example, Moses Irvin received his freedom for his service to General Francis Marion, South Carolina's Swamp Fox, during the American Revolution. Another, unnamed slave, was immediately freed for saving Charleston from a huge fire. And, of course, children of freed slaves were also free persons of color.

Most free blacks, however, gained their freedom by the last will and testament of their owners. Sometimes "faithful service" was rewarded by freedom after the master's death. Often masters freed their mistresses and illicit offspring. The historic documents are full of such situations and the impact of slave owners siring children by slave mothers is clearly seen in the demographics of the free black population. By 1860, fully three-quarters of the free black residents of Charleston were mulattoes.

At first, it was fairly easy for masters to emancipate slaves. But slowly this changed. Remember that society not only accepted slavery, but even thought that it was a positive good. Consequently, free blacks became viewed as increasingly odd. In 1800, in an effort to reduce the number of blacks freed by their masters, the State required that candidates for manumission prove their capacity for self-support before a court. In 1820 it became even more restricted

and a law was passed that allowed slaves to be emancipated only by an act of the Legislature. It also forbade free blacks from immigrating to South Carolina. And those already in the State had their rights of movement severely restricted.

The desire for freedom was so strong that many African-Americans found ways around these new laws. Some slaves were sold to trustees. While still technically slaves, they lived as free men and women. For example, one Charleston owner sold her two slaves to a friend for a dollar, with the bill of sale providing that, "Kitty & Mary shall enjoy free and undisturbed liberty as if they had been regularly emancipated." Some white owners had their slaves sent to northern states, and freed there. In other cases, blacks bought their own relatives in order to provide them with freedom from white ownership.

Fearing a growing free black population, in 1841 the South Carolina legislature passed the "Act to Prevent The Emancipation of Slaves," which declared that any bequest, trust, or conveyance for the removal and emancipation of slaves out of state was voided. Any bequests or trusts that provided for little or no future service were also declared void. And all legal agreements designed to allow slaves to inherit property or gifts of any kind through a trustee were also nullified.

Even this, however, did not deter efforts for freedom. Although only two slaves were officially emancipated in 1850, blacks continued to find ways around the law – and the free black population continued to grow.

Free blacks, however, were never totally safe from slavery. Not only are there cases of free blacks being kidnapped and sold into slavery, there were even legal routes back to slavery. For example, free persons of color were burdened not only by the same taxes as whites, but also a special capitation or head tax. Failure to pay these taxes might end in enslavement. Even the inability to pay fines could bring the same result.

Earning a Living as a Free Black in Charleston

E. Horace Fitchett observed in his 1940 study of free blacks in Charleston, published in *The Journal of Negro History*, that early in the eighteenth century continuing into the very early nineteenth century, "there emerged in Charleston a relatively economically independent group of free Negroes.". In 1819 they were listed in thirty different occupations, including 11 as carpenters, 10 as tailors, 22 as seamstresses, six as shoemakers, and one as the owner of a hotel. By 1849 there were 50 different types of work listed – including 50 carpenters, 43 tailors, 9 shoemakers, and 21 butchers. By 1860, Charleston's free black men engaged in at least 65 different occupations, although 10 occupations provided employment for almost half of them and 81% of all skilled free black workers.

In spite of the many artisans, one of the most important black jobs was barbering – requiring little capital, the number grew steadily during the antebellum. Berlin, however, observes:

> the most common black enterprises were small cookshops and groceries, which usually doubled as saloons and gambling houses where free Negroes, slaves, and occasionally whites gathered.

Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, in their book, *No Chariot Let Down: Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War,* describe the skill free blacks as the:

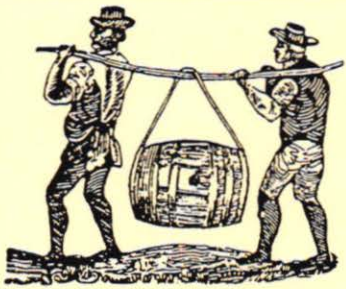
> working aristocracy, an aristocracy with callouses. Their wealth was only a fraction of that of Charleston's white aristocrats, and, unlike the white aristocracy, it did not consist of lush tidewater plantations or gangs of slaves. Instead, it was largely in the form of urban real estate, an outgrowth of their quest for economic security.

In spite of their skill and efforts, free black workers still faced many problems in a slave-holding society. For example, Charleston's City Council attempted to fix the wages of free blacks at $1 per day or 12½¢ an hour. In addition, many whites were hostile to the high skill levels of free blacks. While many whites avoided "black jobs," there was increasing competition for jobs by the late antebellum and this increased the hostility of many whites against African-Americans. In 1848 Charleston enacted a law that required free blacks to obtain and wear a tag (illustrated on the cover) – which ironically was decorated with a liberty cap.

Many free blacks found work as barbers.

In Charleston, if not elsewhere, it appears that freedom and especially the aristocracy, was linked with light skin. Johnson and Roark observe that while mulattoes made up only 5% of South Carolina's slaves, they comprised nearly three-quarters of the state's 9,914 free persons of color just before the Civil War. They also note that Charleston's free colored elite was "uniformly brown, even though about a quarter of the city's 3,237 free Negroes were black."

The free brown and black artisans, craftsmen, and tradesmen in 1860 could be divided into three economic groups – the first paid taxes on property ranging in value from $1,000 to $5,000 and had an average of .54 slaves each. The second paid taxes on property ranging in value from $5,000 to $10,000 and owned what averages out to 3¼ slaves each. The final group – the very wealthiest – paid taxes on property valued at $10,000 to over $40,000 and owned an average of six slaves each. One individual in this class owned as many as 14 slaves.



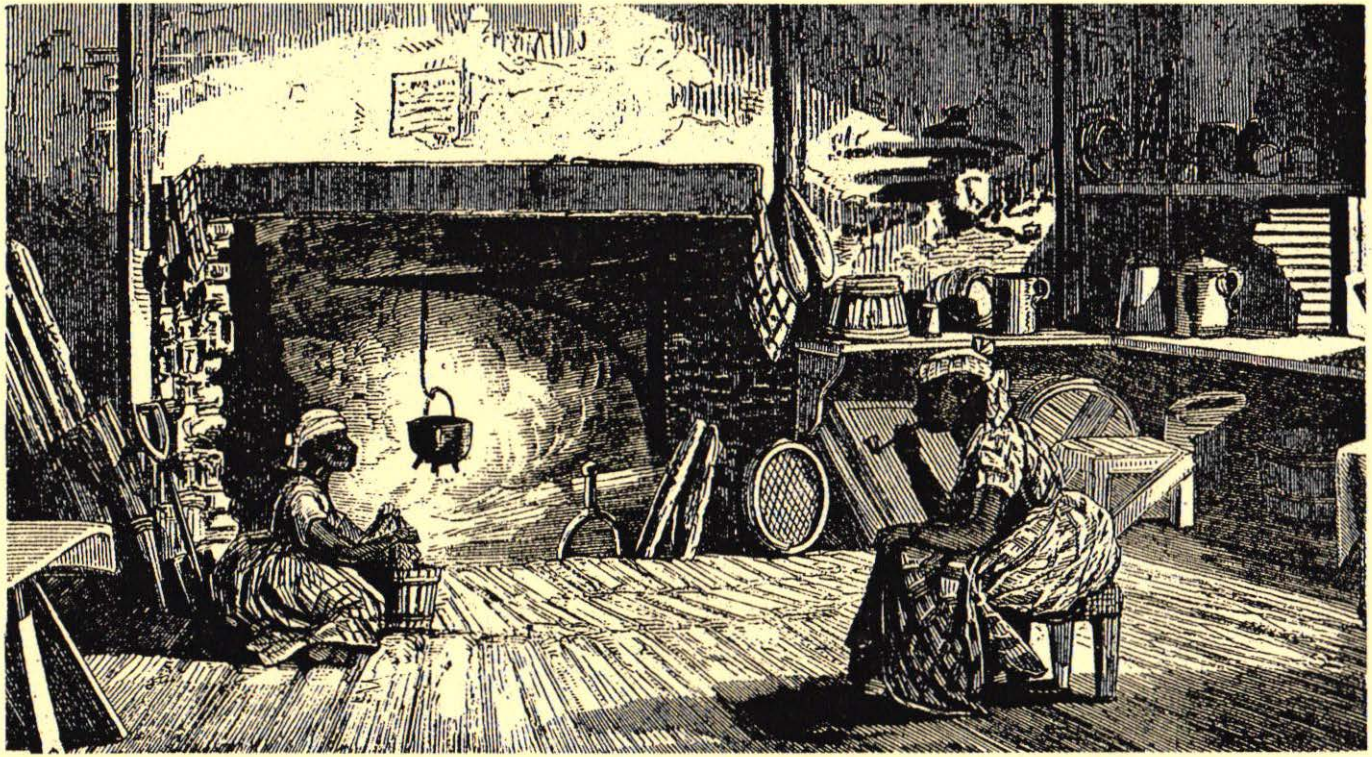
Many free blacks found unskilled jobs as draymen, laborers, and porters.

Where did these slaves owned by other blacks come from? And why? Some authors have remarked that black proprietors, shop owners, and craftsmen were little different from their white counterparts and, when help was needed, they turned to the most available labor supply – African-American slaves. While some purchased family members or friends in order to protect them from the terror of slavery, not all were motivated by humanitarian interests. Fitchett observed that the behavior of at least the brown elite "was a replica of that class in white society which they aspired to be like." More importantly, he explains that:

> it is fair to say that the upper caste free Negro served as a custodian of the [white] system. He interrupted plans which the detached, discontented, underprivileged Negroes designed to overthrow or to offend the mores of the system.

The practice of the elite free blacks owning slaves increased the social distance between the two groups and greatly increased slave suspicions of the free group. This was reinforced by the difference in skin colors – while slaves were largely a black group, the free black ranks were dominated by mulattoes. These factors made it much more difficult for the elite free persons of color and freed black slaves to forge a united front after the Civil War. Fitchett observed in 1940 that, "one of the characteristics of the free Negro of Charleston . . . is that it was a class-conscious group; and identified its interest, loyalties, and manners with the upper cast members of the society in so far as that behavior did not offend or disturb the *status quo*." We shouldn't, however, judge these free blacks harshly. They lived in a hostile society where blacks were assumed to be slaves and freedom was tenuous. Regrettably, this gulf between the "average" free person of color and the "brown elite" has not been well studied by historians or archaeologists.

It's important to remember that more than 75% of Charleston's free African Americans were propertyless and only about one out of six heads of



While still constrained by white laws, urban freedom allowed African Americans a better life. Among the freedoms were the ability to educate their children and practice a freer religion.

household owned property worth $2,000 or more. There was a broad economic — and likely societal — gulf between Charleston's free black aristocracy and the vast majority of the "free persons of color."

Ira Berlin, in *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, notes that, "while many free Negroes made a comfortable living, most were pushed into dismal poverty, forced to live and work under conditions barely distinguishable from those of the mass of slaves."

Berlin notes that most black women worked at "menial, servile occupations," since Southern cities such as Charleston offered few opportunities for employment of women, regardless of color. He comments that:

> like poor white women, most free Negro women worked as cooks, laundresses, housekeepers, and peddlers. But many more free Negro than white women were forced to work. The social imbalance of the free Negro caste in the cities placed many black women at the head of their household, and even when a man was present, his income was often insufficient to support the family.

This was made a more pressing problem by the disparity in the sexes. In 1861 there were 56 free black men for every 100 free black women.

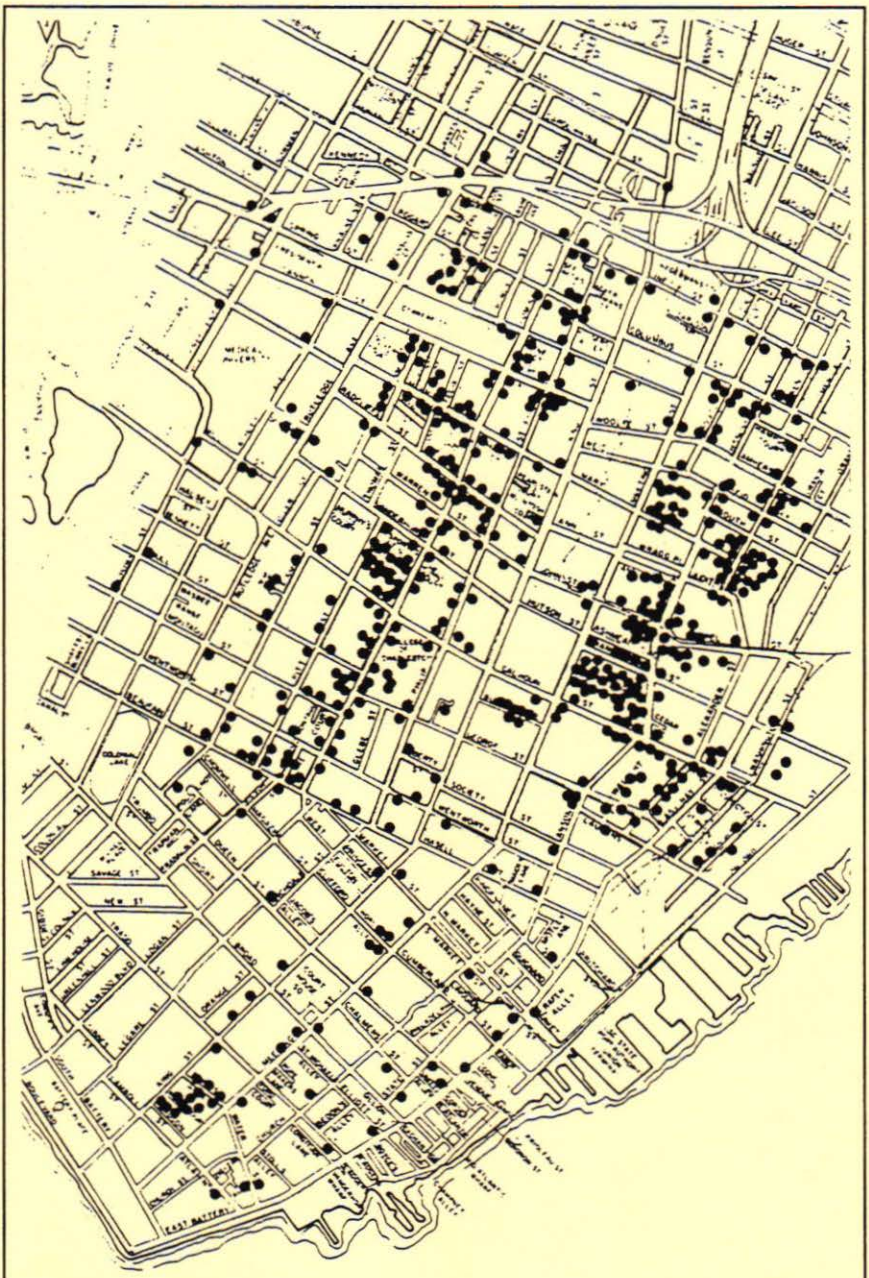
Since the vast majority of the free persons of color were little better than slaves themselves, many formed strong bonds with the slave community. In particular, Charleston's African Church was especially important for bringing the two groups together.

Where Free Blacks Lived

Both free blacks and slaves attempted to isolate themselves from the white community — to live beyond white scrutiny. One such place was Clifford's Alley, which ran west from King between Queen and Clifford streets. In 1861, 65 slaves and one white lived on this street, all in wooden houses. Other areas where slaves enjoyed similar freedom was on Charleston's Neck. In 1860, almost two-thirds of Charleston's free persons of color lived in the upper wards on the Neck. Occupation in this area was spurred by the low rents, inexpensive lots within the reach of many free blacks, and the ability to build wood frame houses, rather than more expensive brick structures required by the City.

In 1856 African-American housing in the Neck came to the attention of the Grand Jury because:

> In these negro rows as many as fifty to one hundred negroes, or persons of color, are sometimes residing, shut out from the



This map, prepared by researchers at The Charleston Museum, show concentrations of free blacks in Charleston during the late antebellum.

> public street by a gate, all the buildings having but one common yard, and not a single white person on the premises. The impolicy of allowing so many persons of color to live together without the presence of a responsible white person, is not the only objection against these places for the neighborhoods of these rows are constantly disturbed by the fights, quarrels, and the turbulence of the inmates. The law of the State declares the assemblage of more than seven male negroes, without the presence of a responsible white man, to be an unlawful gathering; but in these rows from twenty to fifty male slaves live together in one house, with only board partitions separating the tenements from each other, and with a common yard to all the tenements.

Researchers have found that the most common streets for free persons of color to live on were Nassau, Henrietta, America, and Line streets. Other concentrations were found at Thompsons Court, Hagermans Court, and South Street. Numerous free blacks also lived on Elizabeth, Chapel, Mary, and Reid streets. While there are dense concentrations, specially along Coming Street north of Calhoun and in area east of Meeting and north of Calhoun, there were relatively few free persons of color living south of Calhoun.

Charleston's Free Blacks During the Civil War

After John Brown's October 1859 raid, South Carolinians became even more fearful of the free blacks in their midst. Between 1859 and 1860 there were at least four legislative efforts to either remove or enslave free blacks. Their livelihoods came under attack when a bill was introduced to exclude free blacks from the mechanical trades. Another bill was introduced to prohibit them from owning slaves. This wave of persecution began to break down the informal arrangement many whites had to protect free blacks.

Even as South Carolina began moving toward secession, many blacks continued to profess their loyalty to the South, hoping to maintain their freedom. Many free blacks offered to perform services to the Confederacy, building defensive works and constructing ironclad vessels. Some of these services were pressured, sometimes the service was performed in hope of appeasement.

There were free blacks that willingly participated in the war effort. Charles C. Leslie, a Charleston free person of color, was involved in the very profitable gun-running operations of the war. The butcher Francis Sasportas served as a purchasing agent for the City Council, where he purchased his own beef.

South Carolina's white population pointed to the apparent loyalty of free blacks as evidence of the continued strength of the slave system. This didn't,

however, necessarily reflect reality. One newspaper reporter explained, "Some [blacks] have told me how they said to their masters and mistresses on the day of the fight, 'The Yankees will be whipped, Massa and Missus,' but all the while they prayed and believed otherwise." And there are many examples of otherwise "loyal" blacks who escaped the Confederacy when the opportunity arose.

Exploring Charleston's Free Persons of Color

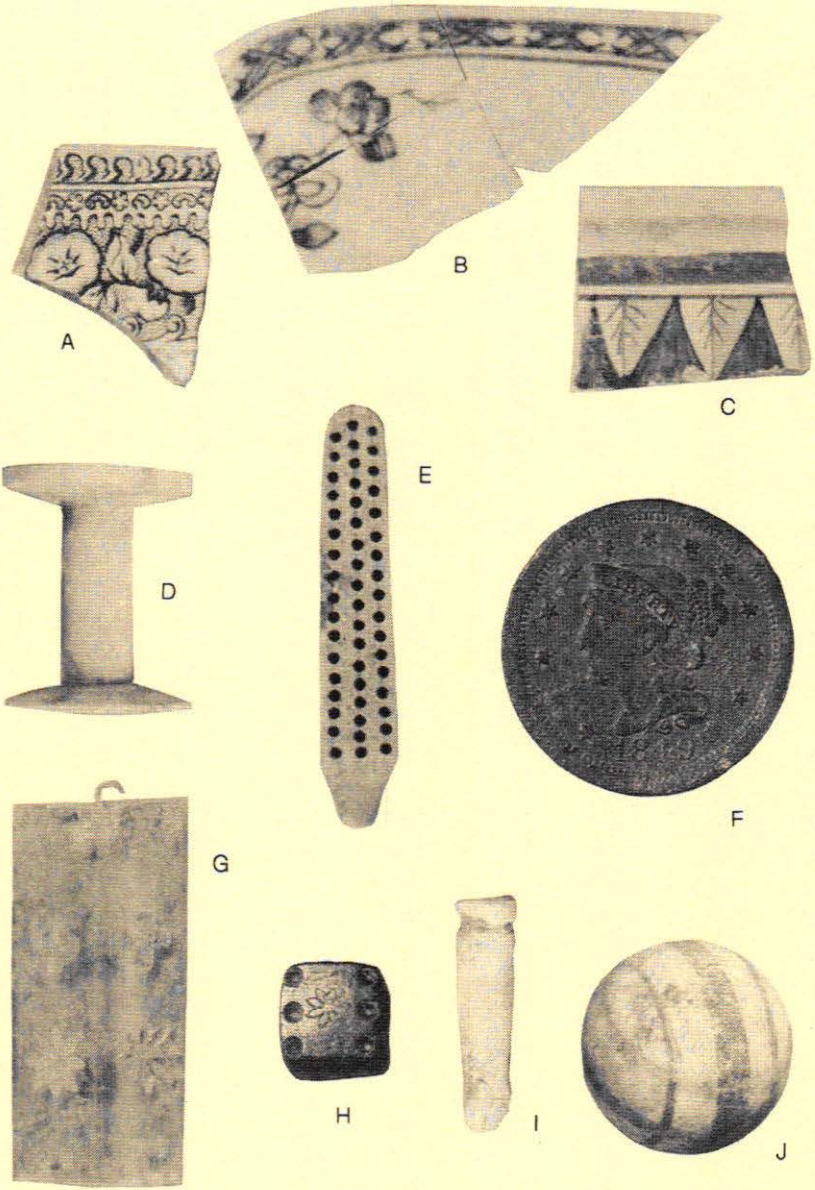
Martha Zierden and her colleagues at The Charleston Museum provide one of the best detailed examination of free persons of color, primarily for Charleston's "East Side." While the discussions provide a range of carefully collected data demonstrating that the gulf existed, there is relatively little cultural interpretation of how this gulf may have affected African-American society or how the differences may have be perceived in the archaeological record.

The Charleston Museum's East Side study also reveals the intensity of the geographic concentrations of free persons of color. Low rents and the ability to build houses of wood on the Neck (outside the regulation of the City) are offered as reasons that free blacks gravitated toward the area. While free persons of color, urban slaves, white immigrants, and wealthy planters or merchants all lived in the same neighborhoods, there was clustering of these different groups. The wealthy individuals were typically found on the wider, major thoroughfares, with the slaves and free blacks living on the back streets, alleys, and dead end courts.

There has only been one opportunity to explore free persons of color in downtown Charleston. In 1996, with the construction of the Saks Fifth Avenue store on the block bounded by Market, Archdale, Princess, and King streets, historic research revealed the presence of several lots typically occupied by free blacks during the early nineteenth century. For example, 161, 163, and 165 Market Street (then known as 99 through 144 Market) were owned before the Civil War by Robert W. Seymour and were rented to free persons of color. Two of the known occupants were Jane Thomas and Ann Graves. On the corner of Market and Archdale streets was a grocery, saloon, and pool hall owned by C.H. Klenke, a white merchant.

The Beach Company provided funds to allow some archaeological study before the Saks store was built. This work, conducted by Chicora Foundation and reported in the book, *The Other Side of Charleston: Archaeological Survey of the Saks Fifth Avenue Location, Charleston, South Carolina*, provides some important clues on how free blacks lived in antebellum Charleston.

The archaeological research began with the premise that the material culture would be relatively poor. This was found not to be the case. The types and proportions of the different artifacts found in the archaeological study were strikingly similar to what are recovered at the residences of white planters and



Artifacts found at urban free black sites. A, blue transfer printed whiteware; B, Chinese porcelain; C, polychrome handpainted pearlware; D, bone thread spool; E, bone toothbrush; F, coin; G, lamp prism; H, bone die with engraved flower; I, porcelain doll's arm; J, painted clay marble.

merchants. The only real differences, based on this initial study, is that free blacks either did not have as much access to tobacco products, or chose not to use them, and that weapon use or ownership was less common among free blacks than among white planters. Otherwise, free blacks appear to have been intentionally working to integrate themselves into mainstream Charleston society.

When the ceramics — the plates, cups, bowls, and serving dishes — of free blacks are examined, it becomes clear that they couldn't afford the same fancy items used by white families. Nevertheless, the crockery used by free blacks was a lot more elegant than that used by the neighboring saloons or by urban slaves. This finding also suggests that at least these free persons of color were gradually acquiring better and finer ceramics. For example, the archaeological research reveals a clear preference for the more expensive painted and printed wares, while relatively few of the edged and annular wares, common at slave houses, were found. Another telling discovery was that the free blacks owned a number of table glass items — tumblers, wine glasses, and similar fancy items not found at slave sites, or even among many white laborer families.

The ceramics also give us a good hint that the free blacks initially maintained their cultural ties. We know that at virtually every slave site studied, bowl forms dominate the collection, probably because slaves had to rely on so-called "one-pot meals." The types of stews and gumbos eaten out of bowls are also closely tied to African foodways. At the free persons of color site, we found a similar reliance on bowls, with relatively few plate forms being present early on. This suggests that their dietary pattern still emphasized one-pot meals.

But the collection also reveals that this pattern changed over time. Plate forms increase over time from about 29% of all the vessels present to as high as 65%. This probably indicates that the free persons of color living on this site were working to integrate themselves into Charleston society — to be more like white families.

Other items at the site also help us to understand how these free blacks might have lived. For example, the presence of slate pencil fragments emphasizes the importance of education in the black community. A fragment of a carpenter's pencil may reveal the trade of at least one of the occupants. The presence of a brass furniture tack suggests the accumulation of nice furniture. Fittings and glass shades from kerosene lamps indicates an effort to outfit the house for comfort. The buttons recovered indicate a mix of nicer goods along with more utilitarian, or work, clothing. Other clothing items include brass hooks and eyes, from women's gowns. Several heavily worn coins were also recovered. Coins are often found at black sites and may reflect deeply rooted West African traditions.

Even the animal bones found at the site help tell us about these free blacks. The faunal collections produced high frequencies of cranial and foot bones, probably because the blacks were butchering animals in the backyards. This

wasn't uncommon in Charleston, especially among those wealthy enough to raise or purchase a heifer or sheep. It assured fresh meat and would have been less expensive than purchasing cut meat from a butcher.

But the remains from Archdale Street also revealed a number of meaty cuts, suggestive of an upwardly mobile family. They weren't just relying on the less expensive cuts and selling the better cuts – they were eating virtually the entire slaughtered animal.

For More Information

If you would like more information about free blacks before the Civil War, look for these books and articles at your local library or ask your librarian to get them for you through Inter-Library Loan.

Berlin, Ira. 1974. *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York: New York University Press.

Campbell, Edward D.C. and Kym S. Rice, editors. *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia.

Fitchett, E. Horace. 1940. The Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina. *The Journal of Negro History, v. 25, pp. 139-152.*

Grimes, Kimberly, Dale Rosengarten, Martha Zierden, and Elizabeth Alston. 1987. *Between the Tracks: The Heritage of Charleston's East Side Community*. Leaflet Number 30. Charleston: The Charleston Museum.

Johnson, Michel P. and James L. Roark. 1984. *No Chariot Let Down: Charleston's Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Powers, Bernard E., Jr. 1994. *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press.

Trinkley, Michael and Debi Hacker. 1996. *The Other Side of Charleston: Archaeological Survey of the Saks Fifth Avenue Location, Charleston, South Carolina*. Research Series 45. Columbia: Chicora Foundation, Inc.

What is Chicora Foundation?

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation more than a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, Westvaco Development Corporation, and The Beach Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

Chicora Foundation is the leader in showing that preservation is not only essential for us as a people, but good business as well. And we remain at the cutting edge of Southern studies with our monograph series, talks at professional meetings, and museum assistance programs.

How can YOU help? Please don't let our fragile heritage become extinct through gradual loss. Join with us in studying the past and teaching it to our future generations. Your generous financial gift to Chicora is a visible expression of your commitment to saving and preserving the important cultural heritage of the Carolinas.

CHICORA FOUNDATION MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

As a member of Chicora Foundation, you help support heritage education programs in our school and community programs. In addition to that good feeling inside, you will also receive Chicora Foundation Research (a quarterly publication), an enameled Chicora logo pin, and a 10% discount on all Chicora publications.

Yes! Our rich heritage must be saved, and I can help.

Here is my tax-deductible gift to Chicora Foundation, Inc.
Please rush me the latest newsletter and Chicora logo pin.

___ $1000/Lifetime ___ $500/Benefactor ___ $250/Patron
___ $100/Sustaining ___ $35/Friend

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
Telephone: (_____) _____

CFR8-1

Please mail this form to: Chicora Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 8664
Columbia, SC 29202-8664